

The Ella J. Baker House

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About the Baker House

The Ella J. Baker House is a non-profit, community-based organization created and supported by the Azusa Christian Community, and led by Reverend Eugene F. Rivers, 3d. Since 1988, we have provided direct service to thousands of high-risk youth and their families by working and living "in the trenches" in Dorchester's Four Corners neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts. We have developed creative strategies and partnerships, not as an academic exercise, but because of the sheer necessity of "doing what it takes" to serve the pressing needs of our neighbors and clients. We combine a settlement-house-style community youth center with direct outreach in the streets, courts and correctional facilities. We help high-risk youth avoid violence, achieve literacy, and access jobs.

Springing from its origins in the early 80's as a Harvard student organization, the Azusa Christian Community based itself in the Four Corners section of Dorchester, Boston in 1988. The neighborhood was young, black and Latino, poor, and violent. The work of the Azusa Christian Community led to the development of the *Boston Ten-Point Coalition*, the *National Ten-Point Leadership Foundation* and *Operation 2006*. Through these initiatives, we have been a key player in the reduction of youth violence in Boston.

By 1995 the Azusa Christian Community renovated a 100-year-old Victorian house in the heart of Four Corners, a formerly fire-damaged "crack house". The house, named in honor of the Civil Rights organizer, serves as the sanctuary for the Azusa Christian Community and the base of Baker House operations.

Our neighborhood

We are located in Census Tract 0919, in Boston's 02124 zip code, and five blocks from Dorchester District Court. In the 1990 Census, 84% of our neighbors were Black, 11% Other Race and 4% White. 15% were persons of Hispanic origin, 31% (1287) were juveniles. Over half of our youth neighbors live in single-parent households.

Our neighbors face considerable challenges competing in Boston's high-tech/high-skilled economy. 43% of our adult neighbors had not completed high school, and only 22% had entered any form of college. The 02124 zip code has consistently had the highest number of Boston Public Schools dropouts. For males 16 and older, 22% were officially unemployed (1990 Census) and an additional 20% were not in the labor force at all. None



were listed as being in the armed forces. For females, official unemployment rates were better, yet 46% were not in the labor force at all.

Youth from Dorchester account for 46% of the total juvenile caseload for the city of Boston, while accounting for only 14% of the city's youth population. Draper Street, 8 blocks from the Baker House, has the highest concentration of juvenile corrections cases in the state. Dorchester Court has over 1,100 youthful offenders (17 to 25 year-olds) under probation supervision.

Key assets

- Proven sustainability, 12 year track record
- Local indigenous leadership, new leadership always under development
- Grassroots organization, over 80% of staff live in the neighborhood
- Highly collaborative effort
- Staff and volunteers' passion for knowledge creates a learning community
- Addresses spiritual aspect of youth's humanity
- Unlike typical faith-based youth programs, the Baker House serves all youth and their families, regardless of religious belief or church-affiliation.
- Predominately male, African-American staff (while most agencies and schools are dominated by women, and most youth's contact with men is on the streets or law enforcement personnel)

Philosophical Approach to the Work

The Baker House philosophy is based on our experience and the tenets of the original Ten Point Plan that was authored by Reverend Rivers. Through our actions, we strive to inspire and influence positive, effective youth development across Boston, the United States and around the world.

Being-there

In our early days in Four Corners, a local gang leader explained why community youth were drawn to dealing drugs and pursuing gang involvement: "When Johnny goes to school in the morning, I'm here, you're not; when Johnny comes home in the afternoon, I'm here, you're not; when Johnny's grandmother sends him for a loaf of bread, I'm here, you're not - therefore I win, you lose." In response to this disturbing realization, Reverend Rivers established "being-there" for community youth as a major priority of his effort. We provide a strong, positive, adult presence in the lives of youth 365 days and nights a year.

Sanctuary

We provide a safe, orderly, clean sanctuary from violence and other environmental pressures. The Baker House serves not only as a hub of staff activity, but also *itself* physically represents our core values.



High Expectations

Staff maintain high expectations for themselves and the youth that make use of Baker House resources. For example, individuals within the house exhibit exemplary behavior, treat each other with respect, remove their hat upon entry, and use appropriate language. Similarly, intellectual expectations of the youth are high; strong emphasis is placed on thinking and learning through various activities, rather than simply going through the motions. High expectations of behavior and performance within the Baker House promote an ideal of exceptional conduct in the general community as well. Through these standards, local youth learn the value of achievement and the potential for their own success.

Asset-based Programming

The assets of Baker House staff, the community, and youth, provide the basis for our programming. Baker House staff and volunteers are highly educated and successful individuals who made conscious choices to forego high-paying employment elsewhere to pursue a career in giving-back and supporting their own community. Their assets are incorporated into the creation of highly effective and intense youth-oriented programming. For example, a volunteer who completed graduate studies in science directs that knowledge towards creating a science literacy program for Baker House youth. Similarly, a summer music camp was created to support and nurture youth who enjoy and possess some talent in art or music.

Zero Tolerance for violence

Baker House staff have dedicated their efforts towards supporting and providing resources for high-risk youth in their community. However, this support is not unconditional. Our collaboration with city institutions such as the Boston Police Department and our surrounding community's support for our efforts both depend upon a policy of zero tolerance for violence. Much of our collaboration with Boston's law enforcement community is based on the Baker House staff's close contact with high-risk youth and their community. Without compromising our role as the "last stop" for youth in their worst times of crisis, we believe in a firm response to individual actions that pose a severe threat to the community.

Holistic Approach

We serve each youth by looking at their entire situation: their assets and risks, family, school, home and the surrounding community. Further, Baker House staff work in a holistic manner amongst themselves: while still maintaining a basic organizational structure, staff do not box themselves into rigid job descriptions and layers of hierarchy. Instead, all staff, from management to our cleaning staff adopt the attitudes of "all hands on deck" and "doing what it takes".

Building Community

We build community:

- between black clergy and white law enforcement - two groups that weren't speaking 10 years ago - because both strongly agreed that young people should not die.
- between concerned adults and alienated youth - because adults are reaching out and providing alternatives.

- between different gangs, neighborhoods, and cultures as young people are brought together to improve their lives.

As an example of our community-building, the Baker House's newest group of outreach workers are five adult ex-convicts and reformed gang members who reach out to students and dropouts, and work in unity with law enforcement officials and community leaders to target the most at-risk individuals.

Our Programs, Activities and Initiatives

Operation 2006

Operation 2006 is a response to the demographic bubble in America's youth population that will crest in 2006. Baker House staff's fears of a resurgence of youth violence came not only from the population projections but also from their personal observations that:

- 12 and 13 year-olds on their caseloads were engaging in riskier behavior and were in trouble at an earlier age than what occurred with their older peers, and;
- The work with older youth was not "complete": former gang members and youth offenders who had been incarcerated in the mid-1990's were completing their sentences and returning to the community, with few resources at their disposal.

Operation 2006 reduces juvenile violence through faith community and law enforcement agency collaboration. Baker House staff, law enforcement personnel, clergy and lay volunteers share street-level information on the activities and culture of high-risk youth. The most at-risk youth are then met with the message: "violence will not be tolerated in the City of Boston, we are here to provide you with alternatives, it is your decision". This information sharing happens in a weekly one-hour meeting at the Baker House and in daily contact on the telephone, in the station, courthouse, detention facility, or street.

Staff and a network of volunteers monitor, mentor, and minister to a caseload of interested youth. The network includes faith-based institutions, secular youth providers, and law enforcement personnel. These young people are enrolled in youth development programs at the Baker House, collaborators, or are referred to other appropriate programs.

Case Management and Youth Work

Baker House staff work to reach high-risk youth, stabilize their lives, and steer them away from court and violence. We return dropouts to school or alternative education and place youth into literacy, job training, and community service programs, both within the

Baker House and at a range of partners across the city. We work with youth on any and all of the issues they face. A consulting licensed social worker is at the disposal of all staff, for everything from simple advice to referrals of youth with serious mental health problems.

With the majority (at least 57%) of youth being raised without a father, many of the tasks that our staff tackle are the *day-to-day responsibilities of fathers*. Tasks that youth request include: *come to court with me, help me get back school, help me negotiate my relationships with my peers, help me learn how to drive, help me find a job.*

Court Advocacy

Court advocacy began in 1988 when Reverend Eugene Rivers responded to requests from high-risk youth to stand with them in court as an advocate. Since then hundreds of youth have received help because a concerned adult went to court with them even when their own parents would not/could not appear. In the early 1990's, a formal partnership was developed with the Probation Department to work together to steer high-risk youth away from the criminal justice system. We developed partnerships with the Department of Youth Services and the Suffolk County House of Correction to reach incarcerated youth and adults. Today 9 staff and volunteers are trained to work with court involved high-risk youth. Court advocacy allows a "carrot and stick" approach to the most at-risk youth.

Pan-African Youth Congress

15 youth & adults reaching to 1000 youth

An effort to organize up to 30 high-risk youth and young adults into their own leadership development cadre that has the capacity to advocate for their own interests. Youth are referred from all outreach efforts. Many are ex-offenders who in-turn reach at-risk youth with street-level knowledge and legitimacy. We have a solid core of 15 members and continue to build.

PAYC leaders give presentations to local high schools, detention centers and alternative schools, and run weekly workshops and mentoring for targeted groups

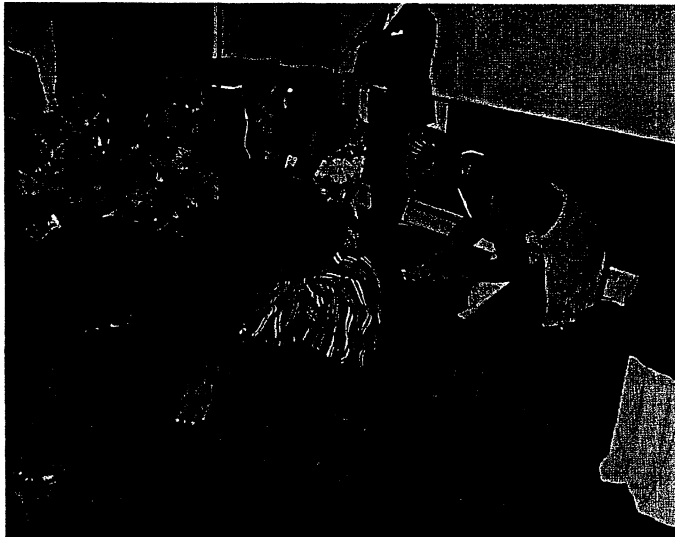
of students and youth. Their self-advocacy includes opposing the death penalty in Massachusetts and supporting the establishment of a boxing club in an abandoned garage in the Four Corners neighborhood.

Job Readiness

40 youth per summer

We have found that 90% of high-risk youth, even "gang members" and full-time street-level drug dealers, want legitimate jobs. The problem is that 90% of these youth don't know how to get there. The myth, that *gainful employment cannot compete with the cash and lifestyle of the streets*, can be broken – if we provide youth with the intensive guidance, reeducation, training and tools to get there.

Over the last 3 summers, we have operated a *Job Readiness Boot Camp*, supported by the City of Boston's summer jobs program, to address skills, work ethic, attitudes and presentability. Baker House staff train youth in job readiness and assist youth in finding employment during the school-year on a one-on-one basis.



Martin Luther King, Jr. After-School Program

40 youth per session

In partnership with Harvard's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research, the program educates middle school and high school students six days a week in history, research, writing, personal computing and web design. Classes are taught in a brand new (October 2000) computer lab inside the Baker House which features high-speed internet access and the *Encarta Africana* CD-ROM encyclopedia. Through this program, young people acquire the knowledge about people of African descent worldwide, and at the same time

acquire the cyber-skills they will need to navigate to success in the 21st century. The Baker House is the pilot site for a nationwide rollout of the program to black churches and CBO's.

Writers Express

20 youth per session

In collaboration with Writers Express, Inc., middle school students are enrolled in a summer and after-school program that helps them improve their writing skills using observation, journal entries, and editorial coaching. The summer program's 2 two-week sessions are held at Tufts University while the after school program consists of 2 ten-week sessions at the Baker House. The Baker House participates in the planning, fund raising, and implementation of the program.

Youth development for incarcerated girls

50 girls

This program serves 50 girls committed to the Department of Youth Services, Massachusetts' juvenile corrections authority. They are served by workshops in detention facilities and day reporting centers that increase self esteem and cultural/spiritual awareness. A volunteer cadre of 12 women mentor these girls after their release from DYS detention.

Our outreach efforts have identified a significant and unmet need for prevention, intervention and youth development programming for high-risk girls. Typically, the boys "make the noise" and thus receive most of the attention and resources. Girls are surfacing as partners, victims playing perpetrators, and members of disastrous relationships with other females and males.

Dorchester Uhuru After-School Program

25 youth

Elementary, middle school and younger high school students fill the Baker House every afternoon to do homework, participate in group activities, talk with a youth worker and "chill" in a safe environment. While a core group of youth participate daily, the program is "open door" - available to any youth who appears at the building on any given day.

Dorchester Uhuru Sports and Summer Academic Program

60 youth

Sports and athletics are essential tools for shaping children's character and building self-esteem. During six weeks of the summer, 45 youth participate as summer sports campers, 15 teens as counselors, funded

by the City's summer jobs program. Four of the weeks are spent at an overnight campground in New Hampshire.

The camp is both athletic and academic: Boston Public Schools' summer school program donates 2 teachers who spend the entire 6 weeks with the campers. Thus, students forced into BPS' new mandatory summer school program are not forced to choose between school and work or school and camp, and their parents are saved from a tremendous logistical problem with childcare.

During the academic year many of these same youth participate in formal soccer, basketball, and baseball leagues, including our own team in Major League Baseball's *Reviving Baseball in the Inner-city* league, and a fledgling boxing club.

Science Literacy Initiative

45 youth

In collaboration with the *Neighborhood House Charter School*, this three-year-old program serves 45 youth in grades 1 through 5, referred from neighborhood outreach. They participate in a six-week summer hands-on science program proven to increase academic performance and a year-round Saturday science club. Current volunteer staff is Professor S. Tiffany Cunningham, Ph.D. Neuroscience.

Prison to Home

200 ex-convicts

While over the years staff have worked with many incarcerated individuals on a case-by-case basis, in 1998 staff began weekly visits to the local House of Correction. Soon, the prison's Release Coordinators and Baker House staff formed a partnership to help Dorchester and Mattapan youth reintegrate into society.

In 2000, the House of Correction received a US Department of Education grant to bring this program to scale, and the Boston Police began screening all Boston-bound ex-convicts for intervention. The Baker House's outreach workers, particularly members of the *Pan-African Youth Congress*, conduct regular presentations to prisoners, and three job fairs have been held inside the facility.

Fatherhood Program

12 young fathers per session

The Fatherhood Program is a three-year collaboration with the Dorchester District Court. Twelve young fathers participate in weekly workshops on parenting skills and the keys to responsible fatherhood. There are

three sessions each year, run by probation officers and Baker House staff. The young men are recruited through neighborhood outreach and court referral.

Young Men's Literature Program (*"Doin' the Knowledge"*)

15 youth per session

Serves 15 youth referred by Dorchester District Court juvenile probation officers. *Doin' the Knowledge* teaches a cultural literacy program designed to improve self esteem, increase cultural awareness, improve academic performance, and reduce recidivism.

Policy Advocacy

The Baker House has repeatedly gone beyond case-by-case advocacy to influence juvenile justice policies and procedures at the highest levels, with resulting changes that are felt back at the street level. Most of the innovations in Boston started with street level clergy, cops, youth workers and probation officers and were eventually adopted by management and policy makers who were attempting to implement community policing.

The intersection between street level workers and management/policy makers is often little understood. The Baker House seeks to learn more about this intersection and to use this knowledge to make further improvements in the local juvenile justice system. Baker House staff and our allies are raising public, management and political awareness and promoting policy change around the issues of: Girls, Sex, and Violence; Juvenile Witness Protection; and Immigration Law.